
*"They Wonder to
Which Sex I Belong":
The Historical Roots of the
Modern Lesbian Identity*

MARTHA VICINUS

Martha Vicinus, Professor of English, of History, and of Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is the author of Independent Women (1985) as well as number of essays, and is co-editor of Hidden from History (1989). She is currently writing on women who dressed as men, in the period 1660 to 1950. In this survey of current work in lesbian history, Vicinus describes the pitfalls accompanying some historians' concern with the origins of individual and group identity—a concern that can limit its possibilities for inquiry by focusing solely on Euro-American instances where identity and sexuality are intertwined and where identity itself is a cultural value; she also indicates the ways in which lesbian history can begin more fully to reflect intersecting and conflicting identities. Locating lesbian history's focus in the cultural margins, and denying that any specific sexual expression can provide a key to understanding the lesbian past, Vicinus argues that lesbian history must be written so as to include not only the dyke, butch, witch, and amazon, but the invert, femme, androgyne, and even the merely occasional lover of women.

In 1884 the aging French painter, Rosa Bonheur, wrote her sister, from Nice, where she had gone in her usual smock and trousers to sketch:

It amuses me to see how puzzled the people are. They wonder to which sex I belong. The ladies especially lose themselves in conjectures about "the little old man who looks so lively." The men seem to conclude: "Oh, he's some aged singer from St. Peter's at Rome, who has turned to painting in his declining years to console himself for some misfortune." And they shake their beards triumphantly.¹

Bonheur's bemused description of the impact her androgynous appearance had upon the general public pinpoints many of the major difficulties historians face in reconstructing the history of the lesbian. Bonheur spent her adult life living with a woman and wearing male attire, but she used a specifically Victorian vocabulary, reveling in her gender freedom, rather than her specific sexual identity. In describing her life-long friendship with Nathalie Micas, Bonheur spoke appreciatively of those who understood that "two women may delight in an intense and passionate friendship, in which nothing can debase its purity."² Did she have an active sexual life with Micas? Was she a lesbian? Did she

identify as a lesbian? Whom should we include and why in the history of the modern lesbian?

Lesbian history is in its initial stages, inhibited both by the suspect nature of the subject and the small number of individuals willing and able to pursue half-forgotten, half-destroyed, or half-neglected sources. Nevertheless, the past fifteen years have seen an encouraging efflorescence of work, breaking from the old psychological paradigms and insisting upon the necessity of a historical understanding of women's same-sex sexual behavior. These studies have concentrated on issues of concern to lesbians, especially the origins of an individual and a group identity.

This attention to identity politics, past and present, has had two obvious pitfalls. As the editors of *Signs* pointed out in the introduction to their 1984 special issue on lesbians, "Such focus on identity may in fact limit inquiry to those cultures in which lesbian identity and survival as lesbians are crucial matters of concern; it may hinder cross-cultural analysis, for example, because it provides inadequate vocabulary for discussion of relationships among Third World women. . . . Discussion of lesbianism in these terms has relevance only where identity and sexuality are intertwined and where personal identity is itself a cultural value."³ Such pioneering collections as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (1982), edited by Evelyn Torton Beck; and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1984), edited by Barbara Smith have problematized the contemporary relationship between a lesbian identity and a racial identity in the United States. But possible role conflicts, personal opportunities, or individual self-definition in the past remain largely unknown. Moreover, the homosexual possibilities for women in the Third World, past or present, are still little understood by Western writers.

Lesbian desire is everywhere, even as it may be nowhere. Put bluntly, we lack any general agreement about what constitutes a lesbian. Jackie Stacey has suggested one alternative to any rigid definition of the lesbian identity. In an essay questioning feminist psychoanalysis, she recommends instead that "it might be possible to consider questions of lesbian identity and desire within the models of fragmented subjectivity":

[T]he diversity of our experience of lesbianism is enormous . . . We cannot assume any coherent or unified collective identity when we recognize the diversity of definitions and experiences of lesbians . . . Lesbian experiences are not only fragmented within "lesbian cultures," but also within culture dominated by heterosexuality, in which lesbians are ascribed the contradictory positions of the invisible presence.⁴

"Diversity" is a salutary reminder that not all questions can be answered, but it hardly resolves the problems facing a historian. If we are to make sense of our history, we must look for connections embedded in differences and contradictions.

Virtually every historian of sexuality has argued that the present-day sexual identity of both homosexuals and heterosexuals is socially constructed and historically specific. Yet same-sex erotic attraction appears to be transhistorical and transcultural and to appear repeatedly in a limited range of behaviors. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, most of us hold contradictory notions in regard to sexual preference without attempting to resolve them: we recognize a distinct group of homosexual peoples or individuals, and also understand that sexual behavior is unpredictable, various, and strongly influenced by both same-sex and opposite-sex desires and influences.⁵

The history of lesbianism also demonstrates a continual jostling of two competing perspectives on the origins of homosexual feeling: is it a product of social conditions or of one's innate propensity? Onlookers have usually chosen the former, but medical

experts have chosen the latter, although by the twentieth century the two models are often postulated simultaneously. Lesbians themselves seem to use both explanations, although those privileging butch-femme relations lean toward a model of innate predisposition, and those preferring romantic friendships favor a conditioned, sexual continuum. Moreover, in spite of the many different forms of actual behavior, lesbians, past and present, are assigned to a few readily recognizable types. As Steven Epstein has pointed out, "Each society seems to have a limited range of potential storylines for its sexual scripts. . . . It may be that we're all acting out scripts—but most of us seem to be typecast. . . . To paraphrase Marx, people make their own identities, but they do not make them just as they please."⁶ The remaining sections of this essay document the "scripts" of the modern Western lesbian.

I. The Parameters of Lesbian Historiography

Conceptual confusion is perhaps inevitable in regard to lesbians, given the historical suppression of female sexuality in general. All societies that I know of have denied, controlled, or muted the public expression of active female sexuality. We must first decode female sexual desire, and then within it, find same-sex desire. By necessity we need to be sensitive to nuance, masks, secrecy, and the unspoken. If we look to the margins, to the ruptures and breaks, we will be able to piece together a history of women speaking to each other. Nevertheless, lesbian history will remain a history of discontinuities: we rarely know precisely what women in the past did with each other in bed or out, and we are not able to reconstruct fully how and under what circumstances lesbian communities evolved. Our history includes teen-age crushes, romantic friendships, Boston marriages, theatrical cross-dressing, passing women, bulldykes and prostitutes, butches and femmes, and numerous other identifications which may—and may not—include genital sex. When we can't even claim a specific sexual expression as a key to our past, we must accept a fragmentary and confusing history.

To date, lesbian historiography has concentrated on three areas of research: (1) the retrieval and reconstruction of both individual lesbians and lesbian communities; (2) the exploration of the two major paradigmatic forms of lesbian behavior, namely, romantic friendships and butch-femme roles; and (3) the question of when the modern lesbian identity arose and under what circumstances. Although all three of these have generated valuable preliminary work, all have weaknesses. Because scholars have spent so much time excavating a lost past, few cross-cultural or cross-national comparisons have yet been made. We also know all too little about the legal position of lesbians, in comparison with the far richer documentation of the oppression of gay men.⁷ In spite of the extensive debates about the influence of the late nineteenth-century sexologists, we do not yet have detailed studies of how their theories were popularized within and outside the medical profession.⁸ And we are still woefully ignorant about women's sexual behavior before the early modern period.⁹

The rediscovery of past lesbians has focused either upon the lives of well-known writers, artists, and activists who have left extensive documentation; upon an unproblematic celebration of the most famous lesbian communities;¹⁰ or more recently, on oral histories of self-identified lesbians.¹¹ We look to the personal life to define a woman, whether by her sexual acts or her sexual identity. Biddy Martin, in her literary deconstruction of contemporary lesbian coming-out stories, has shown the ways in which

they assume a mimetic relationship between experience and writing and a relationship of identification between the reader and the autobiographical subject. Moreover, they

are explicitly committed to the political importance of just such reading strategies for the creation of identity, community, and political solidarity.¹²

She recommends considering multiple roles, rather than a single overriding identity, and points to recent autobiographies by American women of color who have both used and problematized issues of identity and identity politics.¹³ Coming-out stories, with their affirmation of a personal self, seldom critique the lesbian community which made this fulfillment possible. A shift in focus so that both an individual's multiple roles and the communities that have sustained (or rejected) her are examined may yield richer biographies and autobiographies.

Far too much energy has probably been consumed discussing a very American concern—whether romantic friendships or butch-femme relationships are most characteristic of lesbianism. Following Lillian Faderman's pioneering work, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981), some scholars have privileged romantic friendships. Blanche Wiesen Cook and Adrienne Rich have pointed to the historical suppression of homosexuality and argued for the essential unity of all women-identified-women. Cook's definition, for example, has been influential in encouraging women to rethink the broader social and political context of their own lives and of women in the past: "Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians."¹⁴ This definition usefully reminds us that women's sexuality is not a matter of either/or choices, but can be many things in different contexts. But for many lesbians, it neglects both the element of sexual object-choice and of marginal status that was (and continues to be) so important in lesbian relationships. Moreover, the different patterns of sexual behavior in the working class and aristocracy are neglected in favor of a middle class that closely resembles the present feminist movement.

These broad definitions have been largely rejected after several lesbians pointed out that scholars were in danger of draining sexuality from lesbians' lives. In an important special issue of *Heresies* (1981), several lesbians challenged the feminist vision of an egalitarian, "mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex." Amber Hollibaugh insisted that "by focusing on roles in lesbian relationships, we can begin to unravel who we really are in bed. When you hide how profoundly roles can shape your sexuality, you can use that as an example of other things that get hidden."¹⁵ Depending as it does upon self-definition and active sexuality, this definition can become insensitive to the very different lives of women in the past. How are we ever to know, definitively, what someone born a hundred or two hundred years ago did in bed? And as Cook has pointed out, does it really matter so much?¹⁶

The question of when and under what circumstances the modern lesbian identity arose is, perhaps, impossible to answer. If we turn to the larger historical context within which such an identity might have grown, all the usual criteria used by historians to explain social change do not seem sufficient. A lesbian identity did not result from economic independence or from an ideology of individualism or from the formation of women's communities, although all these elements were important for enhancing women's personal choices. In 1981 Ann Ferguson argued that financial independence was a necessary precondition for the formation of a lesbian identity, but this does not seem to be the case.¹⁷ We have examples from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of women who were economically dependent upon their families, and yet were successfully involved with women. The sexually active upper-class Anne Lister (1791–1840) was often frustrated that she had to live with her wealthy uncle and aunt in provincial

Yorkshire, but she arranged her social life to take advantage of every sexual opportunity. Over the course of eight years she managed numerous meetings with her married lover and had several affairs.¹⁸

The onset of the industrial revolution appears to have had little impact upon the formation of a lesbian culture, although it led to more occupational opportunities for women of all social classes. The development of a mercantile economy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Northern Europe may have encouraged some women to think of themselves as individuals apart from their families. Both religion and politics united to emphasize the importance of the individual's soul; those women who found strength through their religious beliefs to seek non-traditional roles may also have felt—and acted upon—nonconforming sexual desires.

The formation of self-conscious women's communities can be seen as a necessary precondition for a lesbian identity. But here again we find a tradition going back into the Middle Ages that yielded feminine and proto-feminist independence and bonding but hardly anything one could recognize as a lesbian identity. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries women organized salons, artistic coteries, religious organizations, and educational institutions. Although these were rarely self-consciously lesbian, such groups clearly provided opportunities for the development of intense friendships.¹⁹

Despite the weaknesses of all current explanatory models, fragmentary evidence and ghostly immanences tease scholars. The polymorphous, even amorphous sexuality of women is an invitation to multiple interpretative strategies. Discontinuity and reticence do not mean silence or absence. Many lesbian histories, contradictory, complicated and perhaps uncomfortable, can be told.

II. The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Theatrics or Nature?

By the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the traditional hierarchies of social order, private and public, were giving way, among Europeans and Europeans in the Americas, to ideas of individualism and egalitarianism, lesbian desire appears to have been defined in four dominant ways, closely linked to the social class of the women concerned. This correlation between class, public appearance, and sexual behavior suggests an effort to categorize women's deviancy in a satisfactory manner that did not threaten the dominant heterosexual and social paradigms of the age. Biological explanations seem to have been confined to educated, often medical, men, but the general public preferred a "social constructionist" approach that emphasized the individual's circumstances.

The most common figure of female deviance was the transvestite. Early modern Europeans took cross-dressed women in their stride, even as they excoriated the effeminate man.²⁰ Virtually all the examples of "passing women" that have survived (and many women must have died with their true identity unknown) are of working-class and peasant women who sought more job opportunities, better pay, and greater freedom.²¹ Contemporaries accepted such economic necessity, but often reinterpreted it in more romantic, heterosexual terms. Eighteenth-century broadside ballads praised the "female warrior" who went into battle in order to find her beloved. Most versions raised the possibility of sexual transgression but resolved matters in the final verse with a happy marriage or other appropriate female destiny.

The precursor to the modern "butch" cannot be traced back to those women who passed as "female soldiers." As Dianne Dugaw points out, such women retained their biological identity as women and simply donned the outward clothing of men. They

managed to be courageous fighters, gentle helpers, and loyal wives simultaneously—and to be universally admired.²² In her examination of the records of modern "military maids," Julie Wheelwright documents how many women depended upon the collusion of fellow soldiers to safeguard their secret.²³ When faced with a heterosexual proposition, the "soldier" either deserted or capitulated to a common-law marriage.

The female soldier's closest relative was the immensely popular cross-dressed actress of the eighteenth-century stage. Wandering actresses, or even less reputable vagrants, made up most of this group. Most of these women were notoriously heterosexual; only the infamous Londoner Charlotte Charke wore breeches in public. She delighted in playing with the possibilities of sexual transgression; her 1755 memoir robustly declared on the title page, "Her Adventures in Mens Cloaths, going by the Name of Mr. Brown, and being belov'd by a Lady of great Fortune, who intended to marry her."²⁴ However, she cast her autobiography in terms of a theatrical comedy, so as to mitigate the dangerous implications of her actions. Neither theatrical nor military dress implied a permanent identity, but rather a temporary, if bold, seizing of opportunity.

More troubling, because more difficult to place, were those women who either appeared "mannish" or continued to cross-dress after the wars were over. Rudolph Dekker and Lottie van de Pol have argued that in Holland women who dressed as men did so because they could conceive of love for another woman only in terms of the existing heterosexual paradigm. If this was so, the highly risky marriages that so many cross-dressed women undertook make sense, for they were "the logical consequence of, on the one hand, the absence of a social role for lesbians and the existence of, on the other hand, a tradition of women in men's clothing."²⁵ Although this suggestion is attractive, we lack sufficient personal information to generalize with confidence about the many and complicated psycho-social reasons why a woman might have cross-dressed in the past.

Elaine Hobby has usefully reminded us that the modern lesbian identity may go further back than early theorists admitted. Hobby argues that the types are familiar to us but that the explanatory models are different. Mannish women came from distant or past peoples, or possessed an elongated clitoris, said to resemble a penis, or were cursed by the stars or witchcraft; or, if all other explanations failed, they might just be born that way. Hobby quotes a 1671 account of a German woman trader which illustrates these diverse explanations, in order to show the early existence of someone whose sexual identity appears to have been both self-determined and innate:

[Gretta] loved the young daughters, went after them and bought them pedlars' goods; and she also used all bearing and manners, as if she had a masculine *affect*. She was often considered to be a hermaphrodite or androgyne, but this did not prove to be the case, for she was investigated by cunning, and was seen to be a true, proper woman. To note: She was said to be born under an inverted, unnatural constellation. But amongst the learned and well-read one finds that this sort of thing is often encountered amongst the Greeks and Romans, although this is to be ascribed rather to the evil customs of those corrupted nations, plagued by sins, than to the course of the heavens or stars.²⁶

Rather than looking for a societal or economic explanation for Gretta's behavior, suitable for cross-dressers, commentators sought an "essentialist" argument rooted either in biology or birth. In effect, she was a precursor to the "mannish lesbian."

Far more common, however, was the "free woman" who seemed to choose a flagrantly varied sexuality. Her appearance and behavior could signal an erotic interest in women, but at other times—as prostitute, courtesan, or mistress—she chose men. The

subject of gossip or pornography, she was invariably portrayed as consuming both women and men. I would label this third category of publicly identified lesbian desire as the occasional lover of women. This woman was frequently attacked as a danger to the normal political hierarchies because of her undue influence upon male leaders. The evidence for her activities can be best described as "porn and politics," pamphlets, gossip, and similarly suspect sources describing flagrant sexual freedom. The connection between sexual deviance and political deviance is hardly unique to women; indeed, the libertine libertarian John Wilkes (1727-97) was the subject of an intense pamphlet war linking him with excessive freedoms of all sorts.²⁷

The most famous example of this kind of political linkage is Marie Antoinette, who was repeatedly accused of political intrigue and bisexual debauchery.²⁸ Although her female lovers were of her own social class, she was accused of taking on male lovers from the lower classes. Much of the evidence against her was generated by those determined to destroy an effeminate aristocracy and to replace it with a purified masculine democracy. In several cases Marie Antoinette was woven into pre-existing pornographic plots with little consideration for historical facts.²⁹ But we should not dismiss this material, for such culturally influential male fantasies, derived from both pornography and high art, had a lasting impact upon the public (and occasionally, the private) image of the lesbian.

The fourth and increasingly common form that lesbian desire took is the romantic friendship. Nancy Cott has documented the ways in which the definition of "friend" changed in the eighteenth century to refer specifically to an elective, non-familial relationship of particular importance.³⁰ Maaïke Meijer in her description of the friendship of two famous late eighteenth-century Dutch bluestockings, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, points to the importance of a shared interest in learning, often in the face of family and public opposition, as a crucial element in romantic friendships.³¹ A sense of being different, of wanting more than other young women, symbolized by a love of learning, characterizes many of the romantic friendships described by Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Yet even here, women's friendships were tightly controlled by external definitions of respectability. All bourgeois families feared any emotions that would overturn the conventional hierarchies in the private and public spheres. The discipline of study was supposed to teach women friends to be rational, to control their love for each other. In actuality, it probably led to a desire for greater independence—and consequently, an increased labeling of such friendships as deviant.³²

Elaine Marks has wittily labeled "the Sapphic fairy tale," the common variation on romantic friendship in which an older woman teaches a younger woman about sexual desire and life; in most cases the relationship is brief, as the younger woman outgrows her initial attraction.³³ The degree of sexual involvement in this relation has been a subject of some controversy among scholars. But descriptions by participants invariably include a combination of emotional and physical feelings, creating, in the words of Constance Maynard (1849-1935), founder of Westfield College, London, that delicious "long, long clasp of living love that needs no explanation."³⁴ Participants emphasized the totality of the relationship, rather than one's outward appearance or a sexual act.

These four forms of lesbian sexual desire were united less by the behavior or attitudes of the women than by the ways in which men interpreted women's same-sex desire. On the one hand, we have amusement, curiosity, and romanticization; on the other, we have horror, punishment, and expulsion. In either response, however, women's same-sex behavior remained marginal to male sexual and societal discourses.³⁵ The vocabulary used to define these visibly aberrant women, drawn from the classical world, emphasized either an unnatural act or a congenital defect. The Greek word "tribade"

appears only in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in France and England, as a description of a woman who rubbed her genitals against another woman's. Well before the pioneering sexologists of the late nineteenth century, medical theorists assigned an essentialist identity to same-sex behavior, arguing that it must be rooted in the individual's physiology. The most common medical term was "hermaphrodite." "Sapphic," the word used most frequently in memoirs, does not even merit a sexual definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.³⁶

Only when a woman seemed to contravene directly masculine priorities and privileges was she punished. But even in these cases, sexual deviancy had to be compounded by a trespassing upon the male preserves of religion or politics in order to draw the full wrath of masculine authority. Lesbian sexuality remained a muted discourse. The usual punishment for a woman who married another woman was a public whipping and banishment. One notable exception, however, was the early eighteenth-century case of the respectable inn-keeper, "James How." Mary East and her friend had opened a public house in the 1730s in a village north of London and by dint of hard work and honesty, they prospered. But East, known everywhere as "James How," had been forced to pay a blackmailer for years. Finally, after the death of her partner, she took her case to the magistrates; they did not arrest her for fraud but imprisoned the blackmailer. All surviving accounts of How treat her sympathetically.³⁷ The most acceptable model for understanding her thirty-five-year "marriage" was the female-warrior ballad, and reports were circulated that she and her "wife" must have decided to join together after they had been jilted by men. Marjorie Garber has labeled this "normalization" of the transvestite as a "progress narrative," which recuperates an individual into a bourgeois tale of economic struggle and social success.³⁸ Ironically, it also bears close resemblance to the lesbian autobiography which Biddy Martin critiqued for its seamless movement toward self-actualization.

This casual and seeming indifference to women's relationships needs to be contrasted with those occasions when women clearly threatened the dominance of men or of the traditional family. The actress Charlotte Charke, in spite of her notoriety, was never a public threat because she remained a liminal figure of farce, but the multifarious sins of the German Catharina Margaretha Linck led to her trial for sodomy and her execution in 1721. She had joined an egalitarian, woman-led religion, and later had converted to Roman Catholicism and then Lutheranism. Dressed as a man, she served in a Prussian volunteer corps, worked as a weaver, and married a woman, with whom she had sex, using a homemade dildo. After hearing complaints from her daughter, Linck's mother-in-law and a neighbor "attacked her, took her sword, ripped open her pants, examined her, and discovered that she was indeed not a man but a woman."³⁹ In her defense, Linck insisted she had been deluded by Satan, and that it was no sin for a maiden to wear men's clothes. Both reasons depend upon circumstances; Linck did not argue that she was biologically different or that she had been born "that way."

Women who avoided a direct confrontation with male prerogatives, whether sexual or political, fared best. The most famous example of romantic friendship in the eighteenth century was the upper-class "Ladies of Llangollen," who ran away from threats of marriage and the convent to live with each other in remote north Wales. Eleanor Butler (1739-1829) and Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) succeeded because they each had a small income, and made a determined effort to reproduce a happy marriage in rural retirement. (James How and his "wife" had followed the working-class equivalent of this pattern in their moral probity, modesty, and hard work.) In their riding habits and short, powdered hair they looked like a pair of old men when seated (they still wore skirts), and their eccentricities were brushed aside by a wide circle of admirers. Yet even

they were subject to gossip. In 1790 a journalist described Lady Eleanor as "tall and masculine" and appearing "in all respects a young man, if we except the petticoats she retains."⁴⁰ She was actually short, dumpy, and fifty-one at the time. During their long lives they faced down snide comments by appearing intellectual, desexualized, and other-worldly.

Samuel Johnson's friend, the well-known gossip Mrs. Piozzi, made a distinction that was typical of the age, in respecting the intellectual Ladies of Llangollen and loathing the sexual antics of the aristocracy. In 1789 she noted, "The Queen of France is at the Head of a Set of Monsters call'd by each other *Sapphists*, who boast her example and deserve to be thrown with the *He Demons* that haunt each other likewise, into Mount Vesuvius. *That Vice* increases hourly in Extent—while expected *Parricides* frighten us no longer . . ."⁴¹ The dislike of such behavior seems to have stemmed from the growing political hatred of the dissolute aristocracy as much as a distaste for their frolics. Nevertheless, the fear of active female sexuality in places of power was a potent threat, as Marie-Jo Bonnet reminds us. She argues that the Revolutionary crowd's decapitation and mutilation of Mme. Lamballe's genitals was an effort to destroy lesbian friendships, and not just the friend of the imprisoned queen.⁴²

III. The Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Centuries: Natural Affection or *Femme Damnée*?

By the early years of the nineteenth century we can see two changes in same-sex relations. First, male commentary on occasional lesbian love-making, whether hearsay, journalism, or literature, became much more common. Public gossip shifted from Marie Antoinette's bedroom politics to the overtly sexual, unconventional women in artistic circles. Now women who were not necessarily prostitutes or well-connected could—at the price of respectability—choose to live a sexually free life. In addition, a few middle-class working women began to wear masculine (or simply practical) clothing. The active, mannish woman from the middle classes can be found throughout Europe and America by the 1820s. Most insisted upon their sexual respectability, but also asserted their right to enter such predominantly male arenas as medicine, literature, art, and travel. While professional single women emphasized their emotional ties, the bohemians flaunted their sexuality. George Sand (1804–76) is the most important representative of the former type, and Rosa Bonheur (1822–99) of the latter; not coincidentally both were economically independent artists.

Sometime in the early nineteenth century the cross-dressed masculine woman—the mannish lesbian—appeared whose primary emotional, and probably also her sexual commitment, was to women—the Rosa Bonheurs about whom society wondered to which sex they belonged. In effect, these women combined the outward appearance of the cross-dressed woman and the inner, emotional life of a romantic friendship. The mannish lesbian, a forerunner of the twentieth-century "butch," is the result of this double inheritance. It is one which denies the theatricality of gender, and instead inscribes it upon the body as a permanent identity. As I will discuss below, this figure became the identified deviant "invert" in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century work of such sexologists as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud. At the same time, both romantic friendships and passing women continued well into the twentieth century. In 1929, for example, in the midst of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* obscenity trial, a Colonel Barker was arrested after passing as a World War I hero for over a decade; she had been "married" for three years before deserting her

wife.⁴³ Romantic friendships flourished among women activists in the National Woman's Party in the 1940s and 1950s, according to Leila Rupp.⁴⁴

None of these familiar types includes what we would now call the "femme" of the butch-femme couple.⁴⁵ Like the younger woman in a Sapphic romance, she was presumed to be only an occasional lover of women—someone who could, like Mary in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), be lured away from her aberration by a handsome man. Teresa de Lauretis concludes: "Even today, in most representational contexts Mary would be either passing lesbian or passing straight, her (homo)sexuality being in the last instance what can not be seen. Unless . . . she enter the frame of vision as or with a lesbian in male body drag."⁴⁶ The impossibility of defining her by appearance or behavior baffled the sexologists. Havelock Ellis, by defining the sexual invert as someone who possessed the characteristics of the opposite sex, was unable to categorize the feminine invert. As Esther Newton has pointed out, he argued tentatively, "they are always womanly. One may perhaps say that they are the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by. . . . So far as they may be said to constitute a class they seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men."⁴⁷ Perhaps Ellis sensed that the "femme" was not a passive victim, but an active agent in defining her own sexual preference. Certainly by the late 1950s, scandal sheets had identified her as the consummate actress who deceived unsuspecting husbands—in effect, she had overtaken the butch as the threatening female who undermined masculinity.⁴⁸ An instability of gender identity adheres to the feminine invert in spite of every effort to categorize her.

The recent publication of excerpts of Anne Lister's diaries for the years 1817–24 has given us new insight into the life of a self-consciously mannish lesbian.⁴⁹ Her entries reveal that many educated women had covert sexual relations with other women, often as a pleasurable interlude before or during marriage, sometimes as part of a long-term commitment. Lister, twenty-five when her published diary begins, spends little time analyzing why she preferred a masculine demeanor, even at the expense of public effrontery. But she was deeply distressed when her more conventional (and married) lover was uneasy about being seen with her at a small seaside resort because she looked "unnatural." Lister defended her carefully contrived appearance, recording in her diary that "her conduct & feelings [were] surely natural to me in as much as they are not taught, not fictitious, but instinctive."⁵⁰ Lister was a forerunner of those women who sought to change their appearance to accord with their souls; she assumed that her behavior was innate and instinctual, even though she had gradually and self-consciously adopted more masculine accoutrements. Her lover, on the other hand, denied that she might be pursuing an adulterous affair with "Freddy" Lister; economic circumstances had driven her into marriage and emotional circumstances had led her into Lister's arms. Both were choices made under social constraints, but in no way were they part of her intrinsic identity.⁵¹ Within a self-consciously sexual couple two conflicting justifications for their behavior coexisted uneasily.

George Sand dressed as a male student in order to sit in the cheap seats at the theater, and into her forties she wore informal male dress at home. She was also for a brief period madly in love with the actress Marie Dorval; each of the men in Sand's life was convinced that the two women were having an affair specifically to torment him.⁵² Given her reputation as a sexually free woman, rumors swirled around Sand, inviting different interpretations of her identity then and now. Sand, as Isabelle de Courtivon has pointed out, fit male fantasies of the devouring lesbian, of the woman who is all body. When this remarkable woman cross-dressed, it represented not her soul but her all-too-dominating body.⁵³ The bisexual Sand symbolized the strong woman who devoured weak men and found her pleasure in the arms of other women. The 1830s in

France spawned novels about monsters, of whom lesbians were among the most titillating. This male-generated image of sexual deviance proved to be especially powerful and one that would return repeatedly in twentieth-century portrayals of the lesbian *femme damnée*.⁵⁴

We are now familiar with the public lives of numerous respectable professional women during the Victorian period. One of the most famous was the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), who led a group of expatriate women artists in Rome. Charlotte Cushman (1816–76), an American actress of the period, frequently acted in male roles and wore men's clothes off stage. She and Hosmer, keen advocates of physical activity for women, took midnight horse rides, sat astride, and followed the hounds with the men.⁵⁵ The highly esteemed Rosa Bonheur was granted special permission to dress in trousers when she visited abattoirs and livestock auctions in order to study the anatomy of animals. She wore her trousers and smock, however, on all but formal occasions.

Lillian Faderman has defined the nineteenth century as the heyday of romantic friendships, when women could love each other without fear of social stigma.⁵⁶ In New England the longevity and the erotic undertones of relations between women appear to have been publicly accepted, for so-called "Boston marriages" were commonplace in literary circles; we have numerous other well-documented examples in every Northern European country where women were making inroads into the professions. Most of these highly respectable couples had one partner who was more active and public, while the other was more retiring. The nineteenth-century English educational reformers, Constance Maynard and Louisa Lumsden, for example, spoke of each other as wife and husband respectively; as headmistress of a girls' school, Lumsden expected her "wife" to support her decisions and to comfort her when difficulties arose.⁵⁷ Lumsden was repeatedly described by her friends as assertive, even "leonine," although photographs reveal her to our eyes as an upper-class lady much like her peers in physical appearance.

The mannish Bonheur worked hard to keep the image of respectable independence which characterized romantic friendships. Nevertheless, her square, craggy features and men's clothes placed her in a suspect category. When French taste turned against her realistic paintings, she hinted to friends that the criticism was as much a personal attack on her life with Nathalie Micas as it was her artistry.⁵⁸ However proud she may have been of her androgynous appearance, Bonheur was also self-conscious enough to insist that her lifelong relations with Micas and Anna Klumpke were pure. Both Lister and George Sand, one moneyed, the other aristocratic, were willing to risk public slander, but Bonheur needed public acceptance to succeed as a painter.

I think that we may have exaggerated the acceptability of romantic friendships. A fear of excess—whether of learning or of emotion—may well have been a cover for opposition to the erotic preference implied by a close friendship. The vituperation launched against Marie Antoinette and her best-known lovers had political roots, but it is only an extreme form of similar warnings found in etiquette books, medical tracts, and fiction, describing the dangers of overheated friendships. The Queen could endanger the state; less lofty women could endanger the state of marriage. The notorious example of the feminist Emily Faithfull (1835–95) provided ample opportunity to editorialize against romantic friendships. In 1864 Admiral Henry Codrington petitioned for divorce on the grounds of his wife's adultery; in addition, Faithfull was accused of alienating the Admiral's wife's affections. Helen Codrington, in turn, accused him of attempted rape upon Faithfull one night when the two women were sleeping together.⁵⁹ Faithfull herself first signed an affidavit claiming that this incident had taken place, but in court she refused to confirm it. The scandal permanently damaged her standing with other

feminists, and she never regained the position of leadership she had held as the founder of the Victoria Press and *The Victoria Magazine*.

During the first half of the nineteenth century we can see the accelerating efforts of the medical and legal professions to define, codify, and control all forms of sexuality, and thereby to replace the church as the arbiters of sin and morality. Women's deviant sexual behaviors, whether heterosexual prostitution or homosexuality, continued to be male-defined transgressions dominated by male language, theories, and traditions. Such narrow terms as "hermaphrodite" were replaced with a plethora of competing words, such as "urning," "lesbian," "third sex," and "invert." Writing in the 1830s, Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet, the pioneering French medical hygienist, linked the lives of prostitutes with those of cross-dressed lesbians. Both represented possibilities and fears for men, for each embodied an active, independent, uncontrollable sexuality.⁶⁰ Underneath their veneer of scientific language, the medical and legal tracts betray many of the same interests and biases as pornography and literature.

It has become a truism that the sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, did not so much define a lesbian identity as describe and categorize what they saw about them. Ellis drew his small sample of six lesbians from his bisexual wife and her friends. All his other examples are either historical or literary; many are drawn from the French writers who had been so shocked by Sand's flamboyance. Like Krafft-Ebing, he identified lesbians by their "masculine" behavior, such as smoking, speaking loudly, and wearing comfortable clothes. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has pointed out that "Krafft-Ebing's lesbians seemed to desire male privileges and power as ardently as, perhaps more ardently than, they sexually desired women."⁶¹ However revolutionary these men may have thought their descriptions to be, both were simply confirming the long-standing representation of women's social transgression as both the symptom and the cause of their sexual transgression. The incipient biologism of an earlier generation of medical men now moved to the forefront. These theorists all insisted upon the primacy of the body as the definer of public, social behavior. The long-familiar descriptions of deviant sexual activity were now labeled innate characteristics, rather than immoral choices.

Several feminist historians in Britain, following the lead of Lillian Faderman, have argued that the sexologists created a climate of opinion that stigmatized single women and their relationships and favored heterosexuality.⁶² Others have argued that the sexologists stimulated the formation of a lesbian identity⁶³ or that their influence has been greatly exaggerated.⁶⁴ All these scholars have, to date, looked almost exclusively at the medical debates, rather than placing these debates in a wider historical context. A host of competing socio-biological ideologies and disciplines grew at the end of the nineteenth century, including social Darwinism, eugenics, criminology, and anthropology; women's sexual relations could hardly remain unaffected by them.

Have we too readily categorized these early sexologists and their embarrassingly crude classifications of sexual behavior? Rather than labeling the sexologists' descriptions benighted misogyny, we might learn more from them about both contemporary lesbian mores and masculine attitudes. Esther Newton has suggested that Havelock Ellis's biological determinism at the very least made available a sexual discourse to middle-class women, who "had no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses—pornographic, literary, and medical—about female sexuality."⁶⁵ I would add that these three male discourses had long affected the traditional categories of transvestite, romantic friend, occasional lover, and androgynous woman; all four types had already been defined as suspect before they were taken up by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. In effect,

women's sexual behavior has never been isolated from or independent of the dominant male discourses of the age.

This dependence upon male theory can be seen in Germany, where lesbians—in spite of their very visible and active culture—remained quite marginal to the leading male theoreticians, Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) and Benedict Friedlander (1866–1908). The former, a physician, worked all his life for the social acceptance of the congenital invert, which he defined as a female soul trapped in a male body or vice-versa, and for the repeal of the German law criminalizing homosexuality. Women connected with his Scientific Humanitarian Committee played a minor role in their Association for the Legal Protection of Mothers and for Sexual Reform, which combined an emphasis upon better maternity and sexual choice. Friedlander's "Gemeinschaft der Eigenen" promoted male friendship, with a special focus on "pedagogical eros," modeled on Greek boy-man relations. Friedlander and his followers championed bisexuality in all people, arguing that women were meant to bear children, while men should bond together to create culture and lead the nation. The women connected with this movement saw themselves as closer to Nature than men, and therefore as carriers of the spirit of Mother Nature.⁶⁶ They too promoted eroticized cross-age friendships, best exemplified by the film *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), in which Manuela in the climactic scene is dressed as the hero in the school play and confesses her love for a favorite teacher before all the girls.⁶⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century, wealthy and/or intrepid women had consciously migrated not only to Paris, but also to Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other cities, where they hoped to find other homosexuals.⁶⁸ They were specifically attracted to cities with bohemian subcultures, which promised to give women space to explore their sexuality, their bodies. An extraordinary number of homosexual clubs and bars—surviving photographs indicate a passion for elegant butch-femme attire—flourished in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and other German cities, attesting to the cultural richness of Weimar Germany; none survived the Nazi takeover of 1933.

Some of the excitement and fragility of Germany's lively gay night life was also characteristic of Harlem of the 1920s. As Lillian Faderman has argued, it was a decade when bisexuality was fashionable, and the sexually freer world of Harlem attracted both white and Black women.⁶⁹ The wealthy A'Lelia Walker threw large and popular cross-race, cross-gender, and cross-class parties; lesbian "marriages" were celebrated with exuberant panache. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Josephine Baker, Ethel Waters, and above all, Gladys Bentley, celebrated lesbian sex. Bentley, a star at the famous Clam House, performed in a white tuxedo and married a woman in a civil ceremony in New Jersey. Many of the blues songs she and others sang mocked male sexual anxieties and reveled in female sexual subjectivity:

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men . . .
.....
They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,
They sure got to prove it on me⁷⁰

But for literary English and American lesbians Paris symbolized sexual freedom.⁷¹ It was already known for its lesbian subculture, thanks not only to Sand's reputation, but also to the poetry and fiction of such notable male writers as Balzac, Gautier, Baudelaire, Louÿs, Zola, Maupassant, and Daudet. In Paris the passing woman was embodied in the cross-dressed Marquise de Belbeuf, Colette's lover, or in Radclyffe Hall.

The enthusiasm for learning languages and the arts, so characteristic of earlier generations of romantic friends, continued. Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney took Greek lessons in order to read Sappho in the original; both made trips to Greece and participated in Greek theatricals. The Sapphic parties of Marie Antoinette were revived in Barney's famous entertainments. The militant respectability of Rosa Bonheur was transformed into the militant demand for recognition, best embodied in Hall's decision to write a book defending the "true invert." The bohemian world of George Sand did not need to be recreated because these women were living their own version of it.⁷²

The most striking aspect of the lesbian coteries of the 1910s and 1920s was their self-conscious effort to create a new sexual language for themselves that included not only words but also gestures, costume, and behavior.⁷³ These women combined the essentialist biological explanation of lesbianism with a carefully constructed self-presentation. The parties, plays, and masquerades of the wealthy American Natalie Barney (1876–1970) are the best known "creations." They are commemorated in Djuna Barnes's privately published mock-heroic epic, *The Ladies' Almanack* (1928), in which Barney appears as Evangeline Musset. Although a "witty and learned Fifty," she was "so much in Demand, and so wide famed for her Genius at bringing up by Hand, and so noted and esteemed for her Slips of the Tongue that it finally brought her in the Hall of Fame . . ."⁷⁴ Barney herself said, "Men have skins, but women have flesh—flesh that takes and gives light."⁷⁵

An insistence upon the flesh, the very body of the lesbian, distinguishes this generation. But if Barney celebrated the tactile delights of a woman's body, for Radclyffe Hall the lesbian body could be a curse because society refused to acknowledge its inherent validity. Without public, and especially family, acceptance, self-hatred was inevitable for her heroine Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness*: "She hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body."⁷⁶ Moreover, contemporaries had the example of Renée Vivien (1877–1909) to remind them of the psychic dangers of lesbian love. Vivien embodied the doomed lesbian by changing her name, her religion, and her body, finally drinking and starving herself to death by the age of 31.

The privileged Barney declared that a woman's body was her greatest pleasure, but Hall contended that a woman's body was her unavoidable destiny, sterile or fertile. Both positions have an altogether too familiar ring, for both had long been encoded in male discourse. This generation of extraordinary women could not escape a familiar paradox that feminists still confront: by privileging the body, positively or negatively, women necessarily became participants in an already defined language and debate. Woman as body had been a male trope for too long to be overcome by a spirited or tragic rejection.⁷⁷

Esther Newton has argued that Radclyffe Hall chose to portray Stephen as a congenital invert, based upon Havelock Ellis's theories, because it was her only alternative to the asexuality of romantic friendships. Actually, by the late 1920s Hall had numerous other alternatives, including Barney's hedonistic lesbianism, Vivien's self-created tragedy, Colette's theatrical affair with the marquise, and the many less colorful monogamous couples in Paris's literary world. For Hall, these women were either too secretive or too ostentatious and therefore too close to heterosexual fantasies about the life of the deviant.⁷⁸ Hall's militant demand for recognition made Ellis's congenital invert the most natural choice. This model, with its emphasis upon an innate, and therefore unchangeable, defect, also carried the status of scientific veracity. Ironically, as soon as a woman's body—specifically Stephen's "monstrous" body—became the focus of discussion, the book

was legally banned in England. Only in 1968 was *The Well of Loneliness* available in England in a popular edition. A book that proclaimed a woman's free sexual choice as overtly as *The Well* was as dangerous as Catharina Margaretha Linck's dildo.

The demand for respect, for acceptance of one's innate difference, assumed a kind of sexual parity with men which has never been widely accepted. Hall's radical message was lost, but her portrait of Stephen remained. The complex heritage of the first generation of self-identified lesbians, experimental and flamboyant, collapsed into the public figure of the deprived and depraved *femme damnée*. The open-ended confidence and playfulness of the 1910s and 1920s did not survive the court case against *The Well of Loneliness*. The politically and economically turbulent 1930s narrowed women's sexual options. The lesbian community in Paris continued but shorn of its former glamor. Those who could find work often had to support relatives. The women's movement itself seemed increasingly irrelevant in the face of such competing ideologies as communism and fascism. Unfortunately generalizations are difficult to make, for we know little about the isolated lesbian of the 1930s. Characteristic of the decade, class divisions appear to have increased, so that the middle-class lesbian disappeared into discreet house parties, the aristocratic lesbian popped up at favorite expatriate spas, and the working-class lesbian could be found among the unemployed hitchhikers described by Box-Car Bertha.⁷⁹ Our only evidence of her public role is fleeting references in popular psychology books—like Krafft-Ebing—labeling her as dangerously independent.

The doomed lesbian was a remarkably durable image. By the 1950s everyone knew what a lesbian was; she had been assigned a clearly defined role. Defiance and loneliness marked her life, according to the pulp romances. The *femme damnée* was not simply a product of a fevered literary imagination; if her sexual preference became public knowledge during the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period she became literally outlawed. After acceptance during the labor-hungry years of World War II, lesbians and gays faced expulsion from military and government jobs.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Elizabeth Wilson in England found the *femme damnée* an attractive alternative to bourgeois marriage in the 1950s; she was disappointed when progressive friends told her she was sick, not damned.⁸¹

In the 1950s both the general public and lesbians themselves privileged the predictable figure of the mannish lesbian. Romantic excess, forbidden desires, and social marginality were all represented by her cross-dressing. But, as I have demonstrated, she was also the product of a tangled history which embodied the outlawry of passing, the idealism of romantic friendship, and the theatricality of aristocratic play. What adhered to her identity most powerfully during these years, however, was a sense of being born different, of having a body that reflects a specific sexual identity. The femme who could pass had disappeared. Although the American Joan Nestle has argued forcefully for her importance, Wilson experienced being a woman's woman as "the lowest of the low" in the liberal heterosexual world she inhabited.⁸²

But the old playfulness of an earlier generation never completely died. Now it has returned not to recreate the past, but rather to celebrate the identification of homosexuality with defined, and inescapable, roles or to imagine a utopian world of transformed women. Like the women of the early twentieth century, many lesbians of our time have set themselves the task of creating a lesbian language, of defining lesbian desire, and of imagining a lesbian society. Monique Wittig, in *Les guérillères* (1969), *Le corps lesbien* (1973), and *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1975), has presented the most sustained alternative world. Her wholesale rewriting of history, in which all mention of man is eliminated, makes it possible to imagine a woman's body outside male discourse. Even here, however, our history is incomplete. In their heroic comedy, *Brouillon pour*

un dictionnaire des amantes, Wittig and her co-author Sande Zeig leave a blank page for the reader to fill in under Sappho. Dyke, butch, amazon, witch, and such "obsolete" words as woman and wife are included. But androgyne, femme, invert, and friendship are missing.⁸³ Rosa Bonheur, who so disliked rigid sex roles, is strangely absent from this world. And what about the occasional lover of women? Historians are more confined to their evidence than writers of fiction, and cannot create utopias, but they can and do create myths. When we rewrite, indeed, recreate, our lost past, do we too readily drop those parts of our past that seem unattractive or confusing to us? Can (and should) utopian language and ideas help us recuperate a history full of contradictions?

NOTES

This is a revised and updated version of a paper originally presented at the "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?" conference (Amsterdam, December 1987). The paper appears in Dennis Altman, et al., *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* (Amsterdam: An Dekker, 1989). I am indebted to Anja van Kooten Niekerk, Theo van der Meer, and the other organizers of the conference for providing such a supportive environment for the testing of new ideas. My thanks to Anna Davin, Karin Lützen and Marlon Ross for their help; their probing questions and detailed suggestions have improved this essay immensely. Special thanks go to Alice Echols and Anne Herrmann, who read and critiqued each version with such encouragement and good will.

1. Theodore Stanton, ed., *Reminiscences of Rosa Bonheur* (1910, New York: Hacker Books, 1976), p. 199.

2. Anna Klumpke, *Rosa Bonheur, sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1908), p. 356: "Deux femmes peuvent sentir l'une pour l'autre le charme d'une amitié vive et passionnée, sans que rien n'en altère la pureté." I am indebted to Karin Lützen for this reference.

3. Estelle B. Freedman, et al., Editorial, *The Lesbian Issue*, *Signs*, 9/4 (Summer 1984), 554.

4. Jackie Stacey, "The Invisible Difference: Lesbianism and Sexual Difference Theory," unpub. conference paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?"

5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 85. Chapter 1, "Epistemology of the Closet," is reprinted in this volume. See also Carole S. Vance, "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality," in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, pp. 13-34.

6. Steven Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism," *Socialist Review*, no. 93/94 (May-August 1987), 24, 30.

7. There are, however, at least two case studies: See Brigitte Ericksson, trans., "A Lesbian Execution in Germany, 1721: The Trial Records," *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. Salvatore J. Licata and Robert P. Petersen (New York: Haworth Press, 1981), p. 33; for the notorious Miss Pirie and Miss Woods vs. Lady Cumming Gordon, see Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict* (New York: Quill Press, 1983). See also Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," in *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, pp. 11-26.

8. But see George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Desire," *Salmagundi*, no. 58/59 (Fall/Winter 1982-83), 114-46; and Myriam Everard, "Lesbianism and Medical Practice in the Netherlands, 1897-1930," unpub. conference paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?"

9. See Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of A Lesbian Nun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) for a case study of a seventeenth-century Italian nun. See also the preliminary study of Elaine Hobby, "Seventeenth-Century English Lesbianism: First Steps," unpub. conference paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?"

10. See the early Bertha Harris, "The More Profound Nationality of their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920's," *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian Feminist Anthology* (New York: Times Change Press, 1973), pp. 77-88; and Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Ericksson, eds., *Lesbian-Feminism in Turn-of-the-Century Germany* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1980). But see also the pioneering literary history of Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin:

University of Texas Press, 1986). Blanche Wiesen Cook and Jane Marcus have always insisted upon the importance of a women's community during the 1920s. See Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Crystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 412-44, and for Marcus on Virginia Woolf, see especially her "The Niece of a Nun" and "Sapphistry: Narration as Lesbian Seduction" in Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

11. See, for example, Hall-Carpenter Archives, Lesbian Oral History Group, *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories* (London: Routledge, 1989).

12. Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]," reprinted in this volume, p. 278.

13. Biddy Martin specifically compares the life-stories in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1981) with those in the predominantly white and middle-class collections, *The Coming Out Stories*, eds. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1980) and *The Lesbian Path*, ed. Margaret Cruikshank (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1985).

14. See my discussion of this debate in "Sexuality and Power: A Review of Current Work in the History of Sexuality," *Feminist Studies*, 8 (Spring 1982), 133-56.

15. Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation toward Ending them," *Heresies*, no. 12 (1981), 58.

16. Blanche Wiesen Cook, "The Historical Denial of Lesbianism," *Radical History Review*, no. 20 (Spring/Summer 1979), 64.

17. See Ann Ferguson, "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," *Signs*, 7 (Autumn 1981), 158-72.

18. Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister*, ed. Helena Whitbread (London: Virago, 1988), passim. Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981) contains the best account of the pleasures and limitations of romantic friendship without financial means.

19. I am indebted to Laurence Senelick for drawing my attention to Pidansat de Mairobert's pre-revolutionary quasi-pornographic romance, *Histoire d'une jeune fille* (Paris: Bibliothèque des Curieux, n.d. [1789]), in which a fictional "Secte des Anandrynes" meet for lesbian frolics under the leadership of a statuesque woman described as possessing "something of the masculine in her appearance" ("quelque chose d'homme dans toute sa personne," p. 23).

20. Randolph Trumbach has documented the shift from the rake's bisexual freedom to the effeminate sodomite in "Gender and the Homosexual Role in modern Western Culture: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries Compared," in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, pp. 149-70.

21. The one obvious exception to this generalization is Dr. James Barry (1795?-1865), a well-known British army surgeon, whom contemporaries assumed was a hermaphrodite on account of her small stature, lack of beard, and high voice. See Isobel Rae, *The Strange Story of Dr. James Barry* (London: Longmans, 1958).

22. Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 148-58.

23. See especially the case of the Civil War volunteer Frank Thompson (Emma Edmonds) in Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 62-66.

24. See the facsimile reprint of the second edition (1755), *A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke*, ed. Leonard R.N. Ashley (Gainesville, Fla: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1969).

25. Rudolph Dekker and Lottie van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 54-55, 71.

26. See Hobby, "Seventeenth-Century English Lesbianism." Hobby is currently writing a book on lesbianism in the early modern period.

27. See Richard Sennett's discussion of the ways in which John Wilkes's body—and sexual freedom—came to represent political freedom in, *The Fall of the Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 99-106.

28. Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Un choix sans équivoque* (Paris: Denoel, 1981), pp. 137–65. See also Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 42–43.

29. See Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 108–30.

30. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 186.

31. Maaike Meijer, "Pious and Learned Female Bosomfriends in Holland in the Eighteenth Century," unpub. conference paper, "Among Men, Among Women" (Amsterdam, June 1983). These ideals also characterized the friendship of Ruth and Eva in *Dear Girls: The Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women, 1897–1917*, ed. Tiersl Thompson (London: Women's Press, 1987), a century later.

32. These issues are touched on, but not completely developed, in Martha Vicinus, "Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships," in Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989), pp. 212–29.

33. Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," *Homosexualities and French Literature*, ed. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 356–58.

34. Constance Maynard describing her relationship with Louisa Lumsden, quoted in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 201.

35. Joanne Glasgow argues that "misogyny, thus, accounts in significant ways for the official neglect of lesbianism" in the Roman Catholic church. See her "What's a Nice Lesbian Like You Doing in the Church of Torquemada? Radclyffe Hall and Other Catholic Converts," *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 249.

36. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, not always the most reliable source on sexual matters, records the first use of tribade in 1601; tribady in 1811–19, in reference to the famous Miss Woods and Miss Pirie vs. Lady Cumming Gordon trial of 1811. Hermaphrodite receives the most complete coverage, with the first reference to its use as 1398. Sapphic is defined simply as "of or pertaining to Sappho, the famous poetess of Lesbos," or "a meter used by Sappho or named after her." Sapphism is not mentioned. Bonnet traces a similar linguistic development in French, beginning with the sixteenth-century use of tribade, *Un choix*, pp. 25–67. She gives three examples from the *Dictionnaire érotique latin-français*, a seventeenth-century erotic dictionary (published only in the nineteenth century) which mentions tribade, lesbian, and *fricatrix* (someone who rubs/caresses another person "for pleasure or for health"). See p. 43.

37. Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p. 56 and Bram Stoker, *Famous Imposters* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910), pp. 241–46. Similar revelations were always fair game for the prurient and pornographic. See, for example, Henry Fielding's titillating (and inaccurate) account of Mary Hamilton, *The Female Husband* (1746). The actual events are described by Sheridan Baker, "Henry Fielding's *The Female Husband*: Fact and Fiction," *PMLA* 74 (1959), 213–24.

38. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 69–70. Garber's discussion is in regard to the jazz musician Billy Tipton, whose sexual identity was revealed at "his" death in 1989.

39. Erickson, "A Lesbian Execution," p. 33. See also Theo van der Meer, "Tribades on Trial: Female Same-Sex Offenders in Late Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1 (January 1991), 424–45. These women, drawn from a similar class as Linck's, were seen as public nuisances and prostitutes, as well as tribades.

40. Butler's and Ponsonby's lives are recounted in Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 74.

41. See *Thraliana: The Diary of Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi)*, ed. Katharine Balderston, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), vol. 1, p. 740. Randolph Trumbach, in "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture," *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Rout-

ledge, 1991), pp. 112–41, documents Mrs. Piozzi's growing awareness of English "sapphists," and the reference to them in slang as early as 1782 as "tommies."

42. Bonnet, *Un choix*, p. 165. See also Terry Castle's recent examination of the continued interest in Marie Antoinette among lesbians, "Marie Antoinette Obsession," *Representations* 38 (Spring 1992), 1–38.

43. The fullest account of "Colonel" Barker can be found in Wheelwright, pp. 1–11, 159. Wheelwright points out that Barker married only after her father-in-law caught the two women living together. In court "his" wife, Elfrida Haward, denied all knowledge of her husband's true sex. Characteristically, the judge was most concerned with Barker's deception of the Church of England. See also Michael Baker, *Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), 254.

44. See Leila Rupp's essay, "'Imagine My Surprise': Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America," in *Hidden from History*, pp. 395–410.

45. But see Colette's attempt to define her in an evocative recreation of Sarah Ponsonby in *The Pure and the Impure*, trans. Herma Briffault (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 114–29.

46. Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal*, 40 (May 1988), 177. Reprinted in this volume.

47. Quoted by Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in *Hidden from History*, p. 288.

48. See, for example, "The Shocking Facts about Those Lesbians," *Hush-Hush*, 5 (September 1959), unpaginated; "Do Lesbian Wives Swap Husbands?," *On the Q.T.*, 5 (July 1961), 28–29, 56–57, 60; Sharon Tague, "How Many U.S. Wives are Secret Lesbians?," *Uncensored*, 14 (February 1965), 20–21, 58. I am indebted to Laurence Senelick and the Lesbian Herstory Archives for these references.

49. See also the more elusive life described in Betty T. Bennett's biography, *Mary Diana Dods: A Gentleman and A Scholar* (New York: William Morrow, 1991). One of two illegitimate daughters of the fifteenth earl of Morton, Dods earned a precarious living as a writer using several different male pseudonyms. In 1827 Mary Shelley helped Dods escape from England to the continent as Walter Sholto Douglas, "husband" of the pregnant Isabel Robinson. Although they gained entry to the highest literary circles in Paris, the Douglases were totally dependent upon funds from their families. Dods appears to have died in penury in 1829, freeing her "wife" to make a highly respectable marriage to an Anglican minister resident in Florence, Italy.

50. Lister, *I Know My Own Heart*, 28. For examples of attacks on her by men, see pp. 48–49, 106, 110, 113–15.

51. We have, of course, only Lister's interpretation of her behavior, but see Lister, p. 104: "I felt she was another man's wife. I shuddered at the thought & at the conviction that no softistry [*sic*] could gloss over the criminality of our connection. It seemed not that the like had occurred to her." The use of a masculine (or androgynous) nickname for the more mannish partner can be found repeatedly in these relations.

52. As Ruth Jordan describes it, "George was credited with at least three simultaneous affairs [with men]: one with Sandeau, unwanted but still officiating, another with Latouche, who had retired to the country, and yet another with Gustave Planche, the unkempt, uncombed, unwashed brilliant critic of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Marie Dorval was the latest, most sensational addition to a cohort of unproven lovers." See her *George Sand: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1976), p. 68. Biographers of Sand fall into two camps, those who sensationalize her life and those who normalize it; the latter, of course, are most reluctant to identify her relationship with Dorval as sexual.

53. Isabelle de Courtivon, "Weak Men and Fatal Women: The Sand Image," in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, pp. 214–16.

54. In addition to de Courtivon, see also Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 274–99, and Dorelies Kraakman, "Sexual Ambivalence of Women Artists in Early Nineteenth-Century France," unpub. conference Paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?" I am indebted to Dorelies Kraakman for discussing with me the importance of the 1830s and 1840s in France for understanding the formation of a new public discourse about women's sexuality.

55. See Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 55–58. See also the biography, Emma Stebbins, ed., *Charlotte Cushman: Her Life and Memories of Her Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

56. Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 190–230. See also Lillian Faderman, "The Morbidification of Love between Women by Nineteenth-Century Sexologists," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4 (Fall 1978), 73–90.

57. Martha Vicinus, "'One Life to Stand Beside Me': Emotional Conflicts in First-Generation College Women in England," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Fall 1982), 610–11.

58. Dore Ashton and Denise Browne Hare, *Rosa Bonheur: A Life and a Legend* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p. 162.

59. The known facts are briefly outlined in Olive Banks, *The Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists, 1800–1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), p. 74. I am indebted to Gail Malmgreen for reminding me of this example.

60. A.J.B. Parent-Duchâtelet claimed that "lesbians have fallen to the last degree of vice to which a human creature can attain, and, for that very reason, they require a most particular surveillance on the part of those charged with the surveillance of prostitutes . . ." (*La prostitution dans la ville de Paris* [1836], vol. 1, p. 170), quoted in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, p. 148. I am indebted to Marjane Sax for pointing out the connection between prostitutes and lesbians in medical and legal texts.

61. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), pp. 271–72.

62. See Lal Coveney, et al., *The Sexuality Papers: Male Sexuality and the Sexual Control of Women* (London: Hutchinson, 1984) and Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930* (London: Pandora, 1985). I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues and their current popularity in England with Alison Oram.

63. Sonia Ruchl, "Inverts and Experts: Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Identity," *Feminism, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), pp. 15–36.

64. See Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion," and Vicinus, "Distance and Desire."

65. Newton, "Mythic Mannish Lesbian," p. 291.

66. See Heidi Schupmann, "'Homosexuality' in the Journal *Die Neue Generation*," unpub. conference paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?" and Marian de Ras, "The 'Tribadic Revolt': Hans Blüher and the Girls' Unions," unpub. conference paper, "Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?" See also Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Erickson, *Lesbians in Germany: 1890s–1920s* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1990) and John Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

67. For a discussion of the political implications of this lesbianism, see B. Ruby Rich, "Maedchen in Uniform: From Repressive Tolerance to Erotic Liberation," *Radical America*, 15 (1981), 18–36.

68. Gayle Rubin has coined the phrase "sexual migrations" to describe "the movement of people to cities undertaken to explore specialized sexualities not available in the traditional family arrangements, and often smaller towns, where they grew up." Quoted by Rayna Rapp, "An Introduction to Elsa Gidlow: Memoirs," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980), 106, n. 4. In her autobiography, *Elsa: I Come with My Songs* (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1986), Gidlow (1898–1986) makes clear that until the 1970s her homosexual community was comprised primarily of men and a few close women friends.

69. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 62–92. See also Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History*, pp. 318–31, and Gladys Bentley: The Bulldagger Who Sang the Blues," *Out/Look* (Spring 1988), 52–61.

70. "Prove It On Me Blues," sung by Ma Rainey, cited in Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, p. 77. See also Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometimes: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America*, 20 (1986), 9–22.

71. The literary relations in this subculture have been explored by Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*; see also the numerous biographies of the most famous figures. Benstock quotes Elyse Blankley (p. 49) in characterizing Paris as "a double-edged sword, offering both free sexual expression and oppressive sexual stereotyping. It might cultivate lesbianism like an exotic vine, but it would never nourish it. In front of [Renée] Vivien—and indeed, every lesbian—yawned the immense, unbridgeable chasm separating men's perceptions of lesbian women and lesbian women's perceptions of themselves." See Elyse Blankley, "Return to Mytilène: Renée Vivien and the City of Women," in *Women Writers and the City*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 45–67.

72. We have very little evidence of a working-class lesbian subculture at this time. Elsa Gidlow's memoirs (pp. 68–71) seem to indicate a similar pattern of seeking out a bohemian artistic culture. During World War I she started a literary group in Montreal which attracted a young gay man who introduced her to the Decadent writers of the late nineteenth century, avant-garde music, and modern art.

73. In her essay "The New Woman as Androgyne" Smith-Rosenberg discusses the revolutionary nature of this project—and its failure, which she attributes to the writers' unsuccessful effort to transform the male discourse on female sexuality (pp. 265–66, 285–96).

74. Quoted in Meryle Secrest, *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks* (London: Macdonald & Jones, 1976), p. 335. See also George Wickes, *The Amazon of Letters: The Life and Loves of Natalie Barney* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977).

75. Secrest, *Between Me and Life*, p. 336.

76. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Corgi Books, 1968), p. 217.

77. The feminist literature on this equation is vast, but see, most recently, Susan R. Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

78. This point is also made by Gillian Whitlock, "'Everything is Out of Place': Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Literary Tradition," *Feminist Studies*, 13 (Fall 1987), 576. See also Benstock's comment (*Women of the Left Bank*, p. 59) about this generation of lesbian writers as a whole: "Without historical models, [their] writing was forced to take upon itself the double burden of creating a model of lesbian behavior while recording the personal experience of that behavior."

79. See Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfoundland Study," *Signs* 2 (1977), 895–904; Marion K. Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson, A Legend in Her Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) [Thompson was the lover of Christa Winsloe, playwright and author of the play and novel upon which *Mädchen in Uniform* was based]; Box-Car Bertha, *Sister of the Road: An Autobiography*, as told to Ben L. Reitman (1937; New York: Harper and Row, 1975). See also Faderman, *Odd Girls*, pp. 93–117 and Gidlow, *Elsa*, pp. 250–81.

80. See Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out: Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

81. Elizabeth Wilson, "Forbidden Love," in *Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics and Experience in the Women's Movement* (London: Tavistock, 1986), p. 175.

82. Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1987), pp. 100–09; and Elizabeth Wilson, "Gayness and Liberalism," in *Hidden Agendas*, p. 141.

83. I am using the English translation, *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* (London: Virago, 1980).